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Anne Clare Rogers
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The Report Committee for Anne Clare Rogers
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

I went into the woods

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Jack Stoney

Jeff Williams

I went into the woods

by

Anne Clare Rogers, B.A.

Report

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Abstract

I went into the woods

Anne Clare Rogers, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Jack Stoney

This paper is written from the perspective of an artist connecting dots. My working method as an artist and researcher is one of keeping my nose to the ground, excited by the possibility of catching a trail or falling into a rabbit hole. I am motivated as an artist by my desire to understand how meaning is made and this paper is a culmination of that inquiry. Through the examples of bird watching, mushroom hunting and sculpture, I propose a mode of relating to the world that privileges the tacit, the inarticulate, or meaning which exists before language.

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Chapter 1: Night Vision

My point of departure is want. I make objects to satisfy my desire to see, to understand, and, like an electrical conductor, to establish a current between the fictive world of my sculptures and the real world. When I talk about fiction in this context, I am talking about distance. I am talking about the distance between the world my sculptures exist in—a world that has its own system of relations and logic—and the world that is generally regarded as *real*.

My sculptures are anchored in the real world in the same way that a mushroom anchors itself to a dead tree—reliant on it for nourishment, while, at the same time, breaking down the structure that supports its place in the world. My sculptures, in this sense, take their purpose from the model of digestion, nourishment, and assimilation.

Mark Manders's writings and ideas on art have left a strong impression on me. For some time now, I have been taken with a sentiment he expressed during an interview with Marije Langelaar: "I believe it's important that people deal with fiction as if it were reality, despite the understanding that it's fiction" (Manders, "Reduced Room with Changing Arresset (reduced to 88%)").

Perhaps there is an analogy to be found in my avocation of birding. For complicated reasons, I often go birding at night. This is, in terms of actually seeing birds, a near futile activity. Without sufficient light filtering through binoculars it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern a clear image from a point of focus. When this happens, I have observed a sort of visual reorientation. Shadows begin to appear as though they are solid forms and, inevitably, I begin to see what I want rather than what is physically present. It is in that moment—somewhere between the wish and the fact—that I seek to locate my sculptures.

Last spring, while leaving my studio late one night as I often do, say, 3:00 or 4:00am, I was lucky to have a chance encounter with a Yellow-crowned Night Heron. I noticed its silhouette as it walked in a peculiar gait, along the sidewalk running parallel to the street where I had parked my car. I was transfixed. I took out my binoculars and watched the bird over the course of an hour or so, while it hunted bugs in vacant streets and parking lots of UT's campus.

Joseph Mitchell, American essayist and author of *The Bottom of the Harbor*, described his experience of watching a Pileated Woodpecker, while it tore bark off of the limbs of a dead Blackgum tree as the most spectacular event he had ever witnessed (Mitchell 6). When I read that, I felt that I understood. Watching the night heron emerge from shadow, walk upright along the same sidewalk that I use everyday day to travel to and from my studio, I felt that the bird was existing in different time, from a different world—and yet, it was a “real” bird, existing in a real place that I know.

I have begun incorporating low resolution photographs of birds into my larger body of work, for example, *Night Heron* and *Barn Owl*. These photographs ask the viewer to believe that the figures depicted in the printed images are what their accompanying titles say they are, a Night Heron and a Barn Owl, while the material presences of the photographs push back against their diagnostic titles. Their obvious pixilation and the highly reflective gloss surface of *Barn Owl* remind the viewers that they are looking at a photograph; a material thing.

Birds announce their otherness—their unknowability—and we are limited in our capacity to bridge that gap. Ostensibly, my photographs purport something about birds or about nature; my concerned, however, is not with birds or with nature themselves as a subject matter. Rather, my concern is with the qualities that connote otherness in a bird, or a mushroom, or a piece of wood. I look to nature as a material resource, for blue prints,

so to speak, for the material presences that I hope to emulate with my sculptures. My photographic work, such as *Night Heron* and *Barn Owl* are intended to function as indexes of the fictive world my sculptures are interlocutors with.

I am reminded of curator Richard Flood's evocation of the American painter, Alpert P. Ryder's words, in his essay *Not about Mel Gibson*, published in the catalog of the New Museum's 2007 exhibition *Unmonumental*:

Have you ever seen an inchworm crawl up a leaf or a twig, and then, clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach something? That's like me. I am trying to find something out there beyond the place on which I have a footing. (Ryder quoted in *Not about Mel Gibson*)

Like Ryder, my reason for making is akin to the inchworm grasping at air looking for something. I use my sculptures to propose a world that privileges the tacit, the inarticulate, or meaning which exists before language.

Meaning is made through shared tools like language, but I also want to consider the ways that these tools can blind us to other possibilities of knowing. Ryder's analogy of the inchworm cuts to a challenge of talking about sculpture. Sculpture is a particular language with origins based in a world that has no direct translation into words. When we talk about sculpture, the pervading attitude is that sculpture is something that can be known and locate using terms of "about." The idea that sculpture is about anything is a limiting notion; one that narrows the scope through which we see.

Chapter 2: Lonely Hunter

Recycled phone books thrashed into pulp and mixed with plaster comprise the spherical base of my sculpture *I still love you*. A wood and steel arm protrudes from the mass. A hollow, cup-like opening at its end has been sculpted to gently house a dead mushroom. The posture of *I still love you*, with its arm outstretched as though it's mimicking the gesture of reaching out one's hand, offering flowers to a loved one.

I found this mushroom, which has now been incorporated into the larger sculpted form of *I still love you* in Saugatuck, Michigan next to a dead oak, which, presumably, the mushroom had fallen from. I was drawn to the mushroom because of its bell-like form and mysterious surface. The mushroom was blackened and coated in a greenish slim. In a different context, the fungi could have passed as oxidized bronze. Given its stage of decay, there was no reliable way for me to identify the mushroom, a fact that would normally render it pointless to keep for a mushroom hunter. Nonetheless, I was compelled to keep it. Although the mushroom was clearly dead, it had a life-like appearance. It seemed like it was living. Thinking about the mushroom, Manders's words return to me: "I believe it's important that people deal with fiction as if it were reality, despite the understanding that it's fiction" (Manders, "Reduced Room with Changing Arresset (reduced to 88%)").

The title "I still love you" is sentimental. It references a lost or missed love, though it is unclear to whom the words are directed and from who they are being uttered. The dead mushroom plays multiple roles within the sculpture. On one hand, the title functions like an oratorio, written for the fungus. On the other, the mushroom becomes a punch line—a grotesque gift offered to the viewer. *I still love you* addresses the viewer

directly in both its title and physical presence in the gallery space and in doing so, the work asks the viewer to suspend—at least momentarily—its artifice.

Is it possible to know a mushroom? Consider some of the common names these fungi have been given: Dead Man's Fingers (*xylaria polymorpha*), Hairy Earth Tongue (*Trichoglossum hirsutum*), Devil's Urn (*Urnula craterium*), Black Witch's Butter (*Exidia Glandulosa*), and Powdery Piggyback (*Asterophora Iycoperdoides*), to name a few Lincoff and Nehring). When, paging through a field guide and reading these names I think of Joseph Campbell. In reference to liturgy, Campbell describes Latin as, "A language that throws you out of your domesticity" (Campbell). I think we should consider Campbell's words in the context of mushrooms and sculpture as well. The common names of the mushrooms I have listed above are a matter of accommodation. Their names are sort of fiction in their own right: one that locates fungi through descriptive equivalences based in fantasy using common English. These mushroom names seem cobbled together, unfazed by reality, and yet, still at the mercy of a domestic lexicon.

My work *Tripod*, a three legged form resembles a table with no top, teases the viewer as a useful object. *Tripod* seems, at first glance, to be a fragment moving toward a complete piece of furniture. *Tripod*'s title is matter of fact. It is a three legged objet, but the form doesn't resemble the thing that we traditionally imagined when making reference to a tripod. *Tripod* has been excessively labored over with handmade joints and thin gauge steel that has been worked to the point that it feels as though it might dissolve into air. Like many of my sculptures, *Tripod* follows a logic that is self-contained within the object, and yet, *Tripod* retains a sense that the piece is somehow of this world, made with familiar, though strangely mutated, building blocks.

People talk about the gut—a bile-strewn fleshy passage—like a compass. The phrases, “What does your gut tell you?” and “listen to your gut” come to mind. I think guts share something with sculpture. Both register on a level outside of words but can, nonetheless, talk to us. My sculptures are a byproduct of paying attention. They are a byproduct of looking for and listening for something even when, like Ryder’s inchworm, I have no way of knowing what I am looking for.



Illustration 1: *Night Heron*

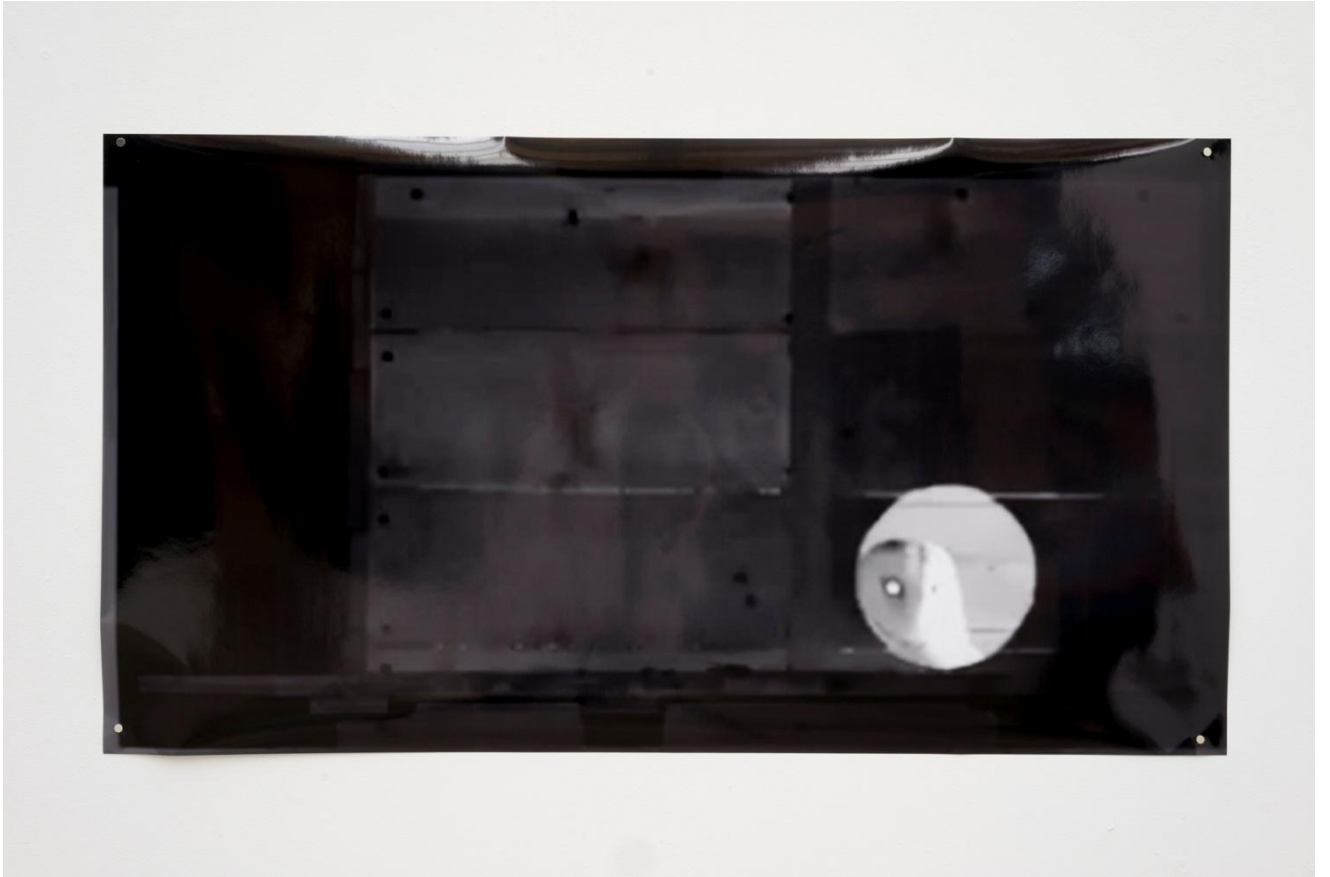


Illustration 2: *Barn Owl*



Illustration 3: Installation view of *Mass on table on dolly* (left) and *I still love you* (Right)



Illustration 4: *Tripod*



Illustration 5: *Sleeve*



Illustration 6: Detail of *Lost wax*



Illustration 7: Studio document



Illustration 8: Detail of *Entrails*



Illustration 9: Studio document



Illustration 10: *Caryatids (wrapped)*



Illustration 11: *Body*



Illustration 12: Installation view of *Vessel* (Left) and *Blowhole* (Right)

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